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Between Heaven and Hell

*Islam, Salvation, and
the Fate of Others*



Edited by

MOHAMMAD HASSAN
KHALIL

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The Ambiguity of the Qur'anic Command

William C. Chittick

Introduction

According to a well-known hadith, "The disagreement of my community is a mercy" (*ikhtilāf ummati rahma*). Whether or not this hadith is sound, it throws a positive light on a phenomenon that is familiar to every reader of classical—not to speak of modern—Islamic literature: the Muslim community does not agree on much of anything. This is obvious in every field of learning—Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, *kalām* (dogmatic theology), Sufism, philosophy, ethics, and so on. One of the many issues on which scholars disagree is how exactly to understand the disagreement. Certain approaches to Islamic teachings find it offensive and try to explain it away, sometimes by claiming exclusive validity for one position and often citing the hadith, "My community will divide into seventy-two sects; all but one will enter the Fire." Other approaches are more inclined to think that disagreement is the result of divine wisdom and compassion. They may cite the hadith in the version, "My community will divide into seventy-two sects; all but one, the *zindīqs*, will enter the Garden."¹

One of the common tactics of those who are offended by disagreement is to claim consensus (*ijmā'*) on their own favorite interpretation, but there is certainly no consensus on the meaning of consensus. Any claim that there is amounts to choosing one of the "seventy-two sects" as the only right position and maintaining that those who do not toe the party line belong to the lost sects—"They are not true Muslims." This charge, of course, has been leveled at countless great scholars and sages over the centuries.

Consensus seems originally to have been a notion invented by jurists to help them codify the Sharia. Later, some scholars applied it to faith (*īmān*), specifically the objects of belief that Muslims should accept. If there is any consensus on faith, however, the most it can mean is that Muslims over history, by and large, have had faith in "God, the angels, the scriptures, the messengers, and the Last Day"; or, they have had faith that the Qur'an is God's speech. Where consensus starts to break down is in the definition of words—faith, God, angels, scriptures, messengers, etc. All these words are and have been up for grabs, and theologians and thinkers of various stripes have argued over what exactly they signify.

Given the obvious diversity of opinion on the Qur'an and Muhammad, the twin foundations of the tradition, how can Muslims escape disagreement? Some ulama (traditional scholars) have suggested that the only safe path is to proclaim, "I have faith in the Qur'an as God understands it" and leave it at that. By definition, however, exegetes, jurists, theologians, and scholars cannot take this position. They need to clarify the meaning of the text for their constituencies, and the moment they try to do so, they are in fact articulating their own understanding, not God's.

Here I would like to look at the "theological" reasons for this disagreement among the ulama. If we can see why such disagreement is not only inevitable but also providential, we may be able to find reasonable grounds for concluding that the enormous diversity of religions in the past and the present has also been providential. For the most part I will refrain from quoting the opinions of the ulama and instead focus on the basic issue of Islamic thought, that is, God, the ultimate source of all multiplicity and difference. Specifically, what is it about God that leads to never-ending diversity?

Theology

Theological positions underlie religious (and nonreligious) views of Self and Other. By "theology" I do not mean *kalām*, but rather knowledge of God, or of the Ultimate Reality, or of reality per se. In the Islamic context, discussion of the Ultimate Reality went on in diverse ways among many schools of thought, of which *kalām* represents one broad type (with subdivisions such as Ash'arī, Mu'tazilī, Māturīdī, and Twelve-Imam Shi'ī). Experts in *kalām* sometimes claimed for themselves the exclusive right to talk about God, and they tended to deal with other approaches by flinging them away among the lost sects. Needless to say, the

other approaches—specifically the two commonly labeled as "philosophy" and "Sufism"—did not take the self-magnifying claims of the *kalām* experts seriously. Moreover, as Islamic history unfolded, these three approaches tended to overlap. Without getting into their similarities and differences,² let me turn to some of the issues that many if not most theologians, whatever their approach may be, take into account when discussing salvation, whether that of themselves or of Others.

Islamic teachings about God are grounded in the two foundational truths voiced in the *shahāda*, the testimony of faith: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's Messenger."³ One of the roots of the ambiguity inherent in the Qur'anic message is that the truth about God is absolute, and the truth about Muhammad is relative. In other words, the reality of God takes priority over everything else, because the universe and all it contains are created by God and contingent upon Him. Muhammad and the Qur'an depend utterly on God and, like everything else found in the world, they are not God, and hence they lack reality in some profound way. The long-standing debate over the exact status of the Qur'an in relation to God Himself has in view precisely the ambiguity that arose the moment the divine speech entered into the realm of contingency, which we call time and history.

The theological significance of the *shahāda* is reflected in the fact that the first two principles of Islamic thinking are *tawhīd*, the assertion of God's unity, and *nubuwwa*, prophecy, the notion that God sent guidance to all peoples. *Tawhīd* explains the divine absoluteness, and *nubuwwa* explains the relativity of the prophetic messages. A corollary of the second principle is that the last prophet received special favors that bestowed superiority on his message.

The quickest way to understand Islamic thinking about divine unity is to reflect on the formula, "There is no god but God," typically considered unity's most succinct expression (*kalimat al-tawhīd*). Given that God is one and that He is the creator of the universe, *tawhīd* means that there is no creator but God. Given that He is merciful, it means that there is none merciful but God. Given that He is just, it means that there is none just but God. Given that He is *al-Ḥaqq*, the Real, the Truth, it means that there is nothing truly real or really true but God. All creativity, mercy, justice, truth, and reality are the exclusive province of God. Anything other than God, in and of itself, is not creative, merciful, just, or real. In other words, the universe and all it contains are utterly contingent on absolute reality. Any reality that things do display—and no one would dispute that they do have some sort of reality—derives from God.

In the Qur'an, this foundational doctrine of *tawhīd* is ascribed to all prophets. It is depicted as a universal, self-evident truth that is understood by any healthy intelligence. Among its more obvious implications is that everything comes from God, everything is sustained by God, and everything sooner or later goes back to God. "Going back" (*ma'ād*) is the third of the three major principles of Islamic theology, after *tawhīd* and prophecy. The issue of salvation and its opposite, damnation, arises in discussions of this third principle—do people go back to God in a happy way, or do they go back in a miserable way? Do they encounter God as merciful and forgiving, or do they meet Him as angry and vengeful? In the texts, the contrast between salvation and damnation is frequently expressed in terms of "felicity" (*sa'āda*) and "wretchedness" (*shuqā'*), a pairing derived from a verse about the Resurrection: "The day it comes, no soul shall speak save by His leave; some of them shall be wretched and some felicitous" (Q. 110:5).

Discussions of prophecy address the human situation in relation to the Absolute Reality. God sent prophets because He created human beings weak and forgetful—not out of neglect or malicious intent, but because creation is weak and forgetful by definition. Nothing is truly strong but God and nothing truly remembers but God. The universe and everything it contains are evanescent and ephemeral. When Adam forgot and ate the forbidden fruit, this was only to be expected, for it is human nature to forget. Adam and his children need to be saved precisely because of forgetfulness and its attendant ills, such as ignorance, self-centeredness, hatred, and misdirected love. Salvation means to be delivered from these ills and to reach the state of health and happiness that is called understanding, compassion, and peace. Everything that people truly want is in fact a divine quality, for the simple reason that no one understands but God, no one is compassionate but God, and no one is happy but God. In other words, there is no salvation and felicity outside of God. Failure to end up in harmony with the divine attributes that define felicity is precisely the meaning of wretchedness. Thus, in the Qur'an, those who reach Paradise "gaze" upon God (75:23), and those who fail to reach it are "veiled" from God (83:15).

The function of prophecy, then, is to clarify the path that leads to felicity. God instituted this path at the beginning of the human race, and it will remain until the end of time. The Qur'an stresses that all prophets were guided by God and all guided to God. Their specific function is precisely "guidance" (*hudā*), though this is contingent on the fact that there is no guide but God. Thus Muḥammad is addressed with the words, "You do

not guide whom you want, but God guides whomsoever He wants" (28:56). In a number of verses the Qur'an says that God guides to "a straight path." This is not necessarily the same as "the Straight Path" (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) to which Muslims aspire in their daily prayers. Straight paths are diverse, given the diversity of human beings, the diversity of prophets, and the fact that nothing is one but God.

The Qur'an presents the general picture that those who follow prophetic guidance will reach salvation. But, what exactly does "following" (*ittibā'*) mean? Here the messages delivered by the various prophetic messages inserted ifs, ands, and buts, and scholars of each religion have taken on the task of explaining these conditions. In the Qur'an, it is fairly clear that the most basic condition for achieving felicity—to the extent that it depends on human activity—is obedience to the divine command (*amr*). Hence we have the fundamental binary notion of obedience (*tā'a*) and disobedience (*ma'ṣiya*), one of the most basic Arabic words for "sin."

The Divine Command

The Qur'an distinguishes between two sorts of commands. The first is universal, absolute, and compulsory because it addresses all things and nothing can disobey it: "His only command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!', and it comes to be" (Q. 36:82). The second is particular, relative, and voluntary, because it addresses specific human beings as possessors of free will, telling them to do good and avoid evil. It designates certain activities, attitudes, and traits of character as the means to salvation, and it warns against other activities, attitudes, and traits that may lead to damnation. People can obey or disobey this command at their discretion—in stark contrast to the first command, where disobedience is impossible. "Sin" makes sense only in terms of the second command. The promise here is that if you follow the command, you will reach felicity, but if you do not, you will end up in wretchedness—unless God's mercy and forgiveness intervene. Jurists and theologians try to clarify the implications, caveats, and conditions of this command.

If we look at the broad contours of this discussion, we can call these two commands "the ontological imperative" and "the moral imperative." These two have been constant issues throughout history and underlie all discussions of free will. The issue is much more than simply "religious," of course. Modern physicists, for example, like to think that the ontological

imperative determines all things and that human freedom is an illusion. The social and psychological sciences have had many proponents of this idea, most famously B. F. Skinner.

Islamic theology employs several pairs of terms to speak about the two commands. Here I will stick to "the creative command" (*al-amr al-kawmī*) and "the religious command" (*al-amr al-dīnī*).⁴ By making this distinction, theologians acknowledge that all things do what they must do and that, at the same time, certain things, human beings specifically, have enough free will to make decisions that will have repercussions beyond death. People are neither forced to do what they do, nor are they completely free. In any case, they cannot avoid the implications of their freedom. They are, as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) put it, "forced to be free" (*majbūr 'alā al-ikhtiyār*).⁵

The creative command is absolute, because there is no god but God, no creator but God, no power but God, no actor but God. God issues the creative command to all things, and the net result is the universe and everything it contains. In contrast, the religious command is relative, because it addresses a small minority of creatures, specifically human beings and jinn, but not, for example, animals or angels. Moreover, it has assumed a great diversity of forms, each of which has been appropriate for specific circumstances. Every prophetic message was custom-designed to fit the needs of the people to whom it was addressed. As the Qur'an puts it, "We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people" (14:4). The truth of each message is relative to the historical and social context in which it appeared. It is not a truth for all times and places, but a truth for a context (which may very well extend to the end of time). As for why a message is "true," this is not just because it was sent by the Truth Itself, *al-Haqq*, but rather because it provides the means to reach salvation.

It is worth remembering that the word *haqq* in the Qur'an and Hadith means not only truth but also reality, appropriateness, rightness, right (as in "human rights"), and responsibility (as well as the corresponding adjectives). Moreover, *al-Haqq* functions as one of the basic divine names, a virtual synonym for Allah. A well-known saying of the Prophet suggests the function of "truth" in Islamic thought: "O God, I seek refuge in Thee from a knowledge that does not benefit."⁶ "Truth" is beneficial knowledge, because it is *haqq*—"right, appropriate, worthy" for the goal of human life, which is precisely to reach salvation.

When theologians discuss the creative command, they bring out various implications of *tawhīd*, the fact that there is no one in charge but God. When they discuss the religious command, they clarify various aspects of

prophecy, the fact that God alone provides guidance, though by means of human intermediaries. Prophecy is contingent on *tawhīd*, because there is no guide but God and none merciful and just but God. God guides because He knows perfectly well that He created human beings forgetful and ignorant, and He also knows that He bestowed upon them enough awareness of their own inadequacy to want to escape from it. In other words, God gave man both a sense of self and the free will that goes along with it. In response to the suffering that arises from this sense of self, God responds with compassion by sending the prophets. The prophets remind people who God is and who man is, and they point the way to escape from the blights of contingency.

The Qur'an differentiates between two basic functions of prophecy. First, prophets remind (*dhikr*, *tadhkirā*) people of what they have forgotten, which is the universal and timeless truth of *tawhīd*, woven into their very nature (*fiṣṣa*). This truth, though expressed in human language, is independent of history and social context, for the simple reason that it voices the timeless reality of God Himself. The second function of the prophets is to guide people to employ their free will in trying to achieve conformity with God as the Truth, the Reality, the Right, the Appropriate—a conformity that results in nearness (*qurb*) and felicity. People, however, though they cannot avoid obeying the creative command, find it easy to disobey the religious command, for they were created weak, forgetful, and heedless.

The two functions of prophecy are reflected in both the *shahāda* and the two commands. Bearing witness that there is no god but God expresses the primordial and universal truth of *tawhīd*; one way to express its implications is to speak of the creative command. Bearing witness that Muḥammad is God's Messenger acknowledges the historical, relative truth of the Qur'anic path that is expressed as the religious command. In short, the prophets taught that despite God's absolute authority, people can avail themselves of His guidance and have a positive effect on their own becoming, or at least on the manner in which they perceive and experience their own becoming.

The distinction between the two commands is closely related to the discussion of *rahīma*, "mercy," one of the most basic divine attributes. Almost every chapter of the Qur'an begins with the formula of consecration, reminding readers of mercy's primacy: "In the name of God, the All-Merciful (*al-Rahīmān*), the Ever-Merciful (*al-Rahīm*)."⁷ This formula suggests a point made by many theologians: If it were possible to express the reality of "God" in a single word, it would be *rahīma*. It is well to

remember this word's etymology, which is obvious to any Arabic speaker. *Rahma* is an abstract noun derived from the concrete noun *rahim*, "womb." Mercy is the nurturing quality of a mother. God, as we know from the Qur'anic name "the Most Merciful of the merciful" (7:15) is "more merciful to His servants than a mother to her child" (as the Prophet said).⁷ In the divine scheme of things, mercy is primary, since in contrast to any other divine attribute except knowledge, it "embraces everything" (e.g., Q. 40:7). God's attribute of mercy tells us that He has absolutely no need for anything whatsoever, that everything has need for Him, and that He responds to all things by freely giving them what they need. The universe and all that it contains are gratuitous gifts. As the Qur'anic name "the Most Merciful of the merciful" suggests, God wants only the best for His creatures. According to one hadith, God created mercy in one hundred parts and sent one part to creation, keeping ninety-nine parts with Himself. With that one portion of mercy the beasts nurture their young and mothers take care of their children. And, as we know, no human mother, though she embodies only a faint trace of one part of God's mercy, will cease loving her children. (If she does, that only goes to show that she does not deserve the name mother; we would need to "rectify her name," as Confucius would say.) On the Day of Resurrection, the hadith goes on to say, God will join that one part of mercy to those ninety-nine parts.⁸

Mercy is ambiguous in keeping with the ambiguity of the divine command. This comes out in discussions of the two primary names of mercy, All-Merciful and Ever-Merciful. Grammatically, both words are adjectives derived from the word *rahma*. Theologians generally say that the mercy designated by the name All-Merciful is omnipresent, and the mercy designated by the name Ever-Merciful is more specific and related to prophetic guidance. Put simplistically, this can mean that the All-Merciful drives the creative command, and the Ever-Merciful drives the religious command. The All-Merciful's mercy is all-embracing, but the Ever-Merciful's mercy needs to be earned. Both sorts of mercy seem to be mentioned in the Qur'anic verse, "My mercy embraces everything, but I shall write it out for those who are God-fearing and pay the alms, and those who have faith in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger" (7:156). When God "writes out" the mercy of the Ever-Merciful for those who follow the religious command, this does not mean that He effaces the mercy of the All-Merciful from those who do not follow it. What it does suggest is that obedient servants receive an additional mercy, over and above the all-embracing mercy.

The saying, "The disagreement of my community is a mercy," clearly implies that God approves of diversity and disagreement. His approval is also suggested by the great variety of religious commands given to different prophets, for these cause disagreement the moment they interact. Ambiguity and disagreement can thus be read as a manifestation of mercy's infinite reach. It extends to all people, who are endlessly diverse and who cannot possibly conform to some procrustean bed of teachings and practices. The merciful diversity of divine guidance appears in many ways, not least in the differing stress that the ulama place on the two commands. To simplify this discussion, one can talk about two basic approaches to salvation. The first gives priority to *tawhid* and finds the path to salvation in recovering the innate human knowledge of the One and acting in accordance with the truth that is known. The second approach gives priority to prophecy and finds the path to salvation in unquestioning acceptance of the creed and observance of the concrete instructions specified by the Sunna. In extreme cases of this second approach, salvation will be achieved only by those who follow a specific group's leader with blind devotion.

In the first approach, teachers stress the creative command and the manner in which the ontological imperative drives all things to reach their own fulfillment. Human beings achieve their specific perfection by actualizing their God-given intelligence—that is, the intelligence that by nature knows *tawhid*. The path to salvation aims at realization (*tahqiq*), which is perceiving and finding *al-Haqq*—the Real, the Truth, the Right, the Appropriate. This is an individual quest that aims for inner transformation and conformity with *al-Haqq* in thought and deed. It amounts to obeying the prophetic instruction, "Give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*": Give to everything that has something rightfully due to it exactly what is due to it. The traditional discussion of "the rights of God and man," an expression that can also be translated as "the responsibilities of God and man," owes a good deal to this approach.

Most ulama situated themselves somewhere between the two extremes, but it is easy to see that the writings of jurists and the masters of the science of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (Islamic legal theory) tend to claim that the only valid path to salvation is the one established by the religious command in its Qur'anic form. Those theologians who allied themselves with the jurists, especially the experts in *kalām*, acknowledged the diversity of prophetic paths but also claimed that the legitimacy of other paths came to an end with the coming of the Qur'an; Islam, in other words, abrogated (*naskh*) all previous religions. In contrast, Sufis and philosophers, who generally

stress the importance of knowing *al-Haqq* and achieving transformation of the human substance, have been more likely to make statements that acknowledge the providential diversity of religious forms, not only in the past but also in the present.

Religious Authority

In striving to reach felicity, people need criteria whereby they can judge what sort of knowledge is true, reliable, and trustworthy. "Guidance," after all, is expressed as knowledge that saves. In fact, however, it is difficult to distinguish between knowledge and ignorance, or between beneficial and harmful knowledge. In classifying the various sorts of knowledge, many scholars divided knowledge into two basic categories, "intellectual" (*'aqlī*) and "transmitted" (*naqlī*). Intellectual knowledge, like arithmetic, is accessible to us without outside help, because it pertains to the very nature of our intelligence. Transmitted knowledge, like language, can only be received from others.

Once we move beyond the verbal expression of *tawhīd*, the question arises as to how *tawhīd* can be known and understood. Generally, theologians held that it can be known simply by pondering the signs (*āyāt*) of God, which are present in the universe and the human soul. In other words, *tawhīd* is an intellectual truth, because it is accessible to intelligence without exposure to a prophetic reminder. The religious command, however, voices many truths that cannot be discovered without God's help. No one can decide on his or her own how to say the daily prayers or how to fast in keeping with God's good pleasure. No one can determine that wine and pork should be prohibited—these are strictly matters of the religious command. The fact that apologists in modern times have tried to show that these prohibitions are "scientific" merely demonstrates confusion as to the difference between intellectual and transmitted knowledge. To claim that we have discovered God's true wisdom in any given command is an act of arrogance on our part. This is why, when commentators try to discover the wisdom, they typically cite several opinions, and end up saying, in effect, *wa-lāhu a'lam*, "And God knows best."

Discussions of the two sorts of knowledge highlight a point that is fairly obvious, though typically ignored: some truths are true because they are true, and others are true because someone says they are true. Intellectual truths are true in themselves, regardless of who may have voiced

them. In contrast, transmitted truths are true because the person who uttered them is trustworthy. The religious command is true because it was voiced by God and His prophets, not because it is self-evidently true.

One of the major problems faced by forgetful human beings is that they do not know how to tell the difference between intellectual and transmitted knowledge and, even if they do, they do not know where to find trustworthy transmitted knowledge. Not only that, but intellectual knowledge typically comes first in the form of transmitted knowledge, which is to say that we learn about it from others before we recover it from inside ourselves. In fact, transmitted knowledge provides the mythic framework for our cultural worlds—that is, language, history, and worldview, not to speak of scientific facts. Despite the claim that modern science provides objective and universal truth, all of us, including scientists, learn the vast bulk of scientific facts and theories by way of transmission, trusting in the scientific enterprise. Everyone follows authority figures and, in this respect, religious and nonreligious knowledge is the same. Nonreligious types like to claim that "science" has the status of the papacy, and religious types cling to their own favorite leaders—if not the pope, then preachers or teachers of one sort or another. People tend to ignore the fact that blind acceptance stifles intelligence. They want to be spoon-fed the truth and do not like to hear that some truths need to be understood by their own struggle—this is a phenomenon that most professors will be happy to confirm.

'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, alluded to the distinction between intellectual and transmitted knowledge when he said, "Look not at him who spoke, but look at what he said."⁹ Clearly, 'Alī had in view intellectual knowledge, where the only issue is the truth or falsity of the statement, not the authority of the speaker. In transmitted knowledge, the issue is the speaker's trustworthiness, so it is important to know if the source is the Qur'an, or the Hadith, or something else. In the case of transmitted knowledge, it is perfectly legitimate to make *ad hominem* attacks. Investigating the truthfulness and moral fiber of the speaker is part of the methodology of *'ilm al-rijāl*—"the science of the men," the study of the biographies of hadith transmitters. By way of contrast, *ad hominem* attacks in the intellectual sciences are considered an affront to intelligence, an illegitimate tactic used to avoid thinking about what we have chosen to believe.

Following the authority of those who transmit the religious command is often called *taqlīd*, "imitation." In matters of the Sharia, where the issue

is how to act rightly, imitation is perfectly normal. One must get instructions on ritual practices and on commandments and prohibitions from God and the Prophet. These instructions have typically been conveyed by the jurists, who have made the study of the Sharia their vocation. In issues of faith (*īmān*), however, imitation is generally considered unacceptable to God, for faith belongs only marginally to the realm of transmission. People may accept a creed or a catechism on the basis of the transmitted sources, or they may quote scripture, but this does not prove that they have faith in what they are saying, because faith demands understanding. Discussions of the word *īmān* typically point out that it means to acknowledge or assent to a truth that one knows (*tašdīq*). This is most obvious in the foundational issue of *tawhīd*, which has little to do with belief and much to do with understanding.

Faith, then, is not simply to recite a creed or to voice a catechism. People have the obligation to understand what they believe. The recited words are pointers to the truths articulated in the revealed message. One must grapple with faith. Who exactly is this God in whom I have faith and why exactly is He "one"? Not to ask oneself these questions and not to strive to improve one's understanding is to disregard the repeated Qur'anic commandments to think, reflect, ponder, and use one's head.

The issue of imitating transmitted teachings is especially relevant in statements about salvation made by people who claim religious authority for themselves. Often such people say that certain passages in the transmitted texts have decided the issue once and for all, and no one has a right to question the received interpretation—"There is consensus on this issue," they tell us. In other words, the authorities have already done the thinking, and people should imitate their betters. The basic difficulty with this claim is that, no matter how unavoidable imitation may be in performing the right practices, no one can understand for you.

The Ambiguities of Interpretation

Claims to possess categorical knowledge about salvation and damnation stand on the slippery ground of interpreting the divine Word. Here I use the word *interpretation* not to mean *tafsīr*, but rather all forms of literature that quote and explain Qur'anic verses. This literature has not only been enormous but also endlessly insightful. In studying it, one becomes aware that the only issue that the Qur'an leaves unambiguous is the fact

that God is. Every statement that the Qur'an makes about *who* God is or *what* God is depends upon designating Him by a name, attribute, or description. At that point the meaning of the designation has to be explained. Many preachers and teachers would like you to think that the discussion is now closed. But there can be no consensus on meanings understood from words, because that pertains to consciousness, the living substance of the soul. The only possible place where consensus might exist is in the *expression* of meaning. In short, no one can imitate someone else's awareness of God. Here especially, as al-Ghazālī said (as noted above), people are forced to be free.

With good reason, exegetes often strive to remove ambiguity in the religious command. They want to clarify the path of reaching felicity and avoiding wretchedness, so subtlety appears to them as an enemy. The underlying tactic is to claim that the religious command, which by nature is relative and contingent, has the status of the creative command, which is absolute and incontrovertible. This tactic seems to be found in all religions (and it is also employed by other claimants to authority, such as ideologues and popularizers of the scientific worldview). In effect, every religious community takes its own messenger or message as the unshakable point of reference, the uniquely adequate lens through which to view the Absolute Reality. The relative truth of a specific religious command becomes a de facto absolute truth for those who follow that command. Nor are people wrong to see this relative truth as "absolute," for truth lies in the efficacy of a message to bring about salvation and, for the members of a specific community, the religious command that founded their community shows the way. In the case of the Muslim community, the *ulama* had no good reason to argue in support of Qur'anic references to the universality of religious truth, verses like "Every nation has its messenger" (10:47). If they had suggested that Others might be following legitimate ways, they would have been diluting the absolute authority of the religious command designated by the Qur'an and the Sunna.

Once theologians have given absolute significance to the relative truth of the religious command, they necessarily remain within the symbolic universe of their own tradition, within which the religious command plays the role of the immutable and irrefutable center. When they look at other communities, they do so with the presupposition that any other religious command—if they accept that there is such a thing—can at best have a limited and contingent value, of no interest when contrasted with the absolute truth of "the command."

In premodern times, discussions of religious differences like those that can be undertaken today were impossible. The great authorities of the past did not have what we now take for granted: access to peers in other religions and a wealth of books and information. Premodern scholars interpreted what little they knew about other religions in terms of the absolute truth of their own religious command. Practically no one had the means or the interest to look at the actual teachings of other religions or to learn about them by talking with their qualified representatives.¹⁰ As a result the ulama classified "Others" under various categories established by the Qur'an and the Hadith, and the Qur'an's negative statements about the Others were taken as superseding any positive statements. Terms like "Jews" and "Christians" were understood as designations for misguided perspectives, with no questions asked. The Others were in effect straw men, set up for the sake of reminding coreligionists that God had done them a great favor by providing them with the Qur'an and the Sunna.

The Qur'an provides numerous references to the absoluteness of God and the relativity of His messages, and many verses giving Muslims good reason to think that they have received the best deal. Nonetheless, all these verses have an essential ambiguity that grows from the inescapable contradiction between the creative command and the religious command. Examples are numerous, and the exegetical literature is full of attempts to ignore the ambiguity, explain it away, or bring out the merciful wisdom lying behind it. Three examples will have to suffice.

First, when we ask what God wants from human beings, the most basic answer provided by the Qur'an accords with *tawhīd* and the creative command: God wants from people exactly what they are doing. "He created you and what you do" (Q. 37:96). Another answer has the religious command in view: God wants people to change what they are doing. Within the confines of the religious command, the ambiguities multiply, because the exact details of the worship and service that God wants from His servants have never been clear. If they had been, there would have been unanimity among the ulama on the issue, whereas it has been contested constantly. Moreover, it is obvious that God does not want the same thing from everyone, as in the differing requirements for men and women, or for children, adults, and old people. In various slightly different formulations the Qur'an says, "God does not burden a soul except to its capacity" (2:233, 2:286, 6:152, 7:42, 23:62). "To burden" here is *taklif*, that is, to prescribe; to issue the religious command. Each person's capacity to take on the burden is necessarily unique, because each of God's creatures is

unique. Hence, no two people have the same burden in God's eyes. I recognize that all these issues are discussed extensively by the ulama, but that is precisely the point. The ulama have not reached and cannot reach unanimity, because that would contradict *tawhīd*, the axiom that "Nothing is truly one but God."

If God's "Speech" is one, that is only inasmuch as it is nothing other than God Himself. The multiple verses of the Qur'an (not to mention other scriptures) show that the One Speech, once it enters into manifestation, takes myriad forms, because all that is not God—including scriptures and prophets—is many by definition.

Second, the Qur'an's use of the word *islām* provides an obvious example of ambiguity. Muslims and non-Muslims throw this word around without bothering to explain what they are talking about. Using the word to designate the religion itself, however, is barely supported by the Qur'an, where its basic sense is "submission" or "surrender" to God's *command*, whether religious or creative. Since the religious command has taken diverse forms, the Qur'an calls various pre-Islamic prophets, such as Abraham and Joseph, and their followers, such as the apostles of Jesus, *muslims*. The word *islām* can also designate the absolute, universal, compulsory submission of all things: "To Him has *submitted* everything in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly" (Q. 3:83).

If someone claims that the Qur'an says that only "Muslims" will be saved, this could mean that everyone in the heavens and the earth will eventually be saved—a notion, by the way, that is far more in keeping with God's universal, all-embracing mercy than any of the other options. As for the usual objections—"What about Hitler?," etc.—one needs to remember that there is no need to deny punishment or staying in Hell forever when we acknowledge the absoluteness and finality of God's all-embracing mercy. God has all the time He needs to mete out "the appropriate recompense" (Q. 78:26), and, given His infinity, there is plenty of time to spare for the All-Merciful to receive all His creatures in a loving embrace.

Based on the repeated Qur'anic usage of the terms *islām* and *muslim*, the statement that only "Muslims" will be saved would most likely mean that all the prophets and all those who follow them adequately will be saved. This is not to neglect the fact that God will intercede and save many who followed inadequately or who never followed at all, even pulling a group of people out of the Fire "who never did any good whatsoever," as the hadith has it.¹¹ The weight of the interpretive tradition, naturally enough, falls on the least ambiguous of the possible meanings, namely

that only those who submit to the teachings and practices established by the Qur'an and the Prophet will be saved. This tendency to narrow down the meaning reaches a further extreme when we meet the common idea that only the speaker's sect of Islam will be saved, and the other seventy-one sects are doomed to Hell.

Another word central to the Qur'anic notion of obeying the divine command is *'abd*, "servant," which is the general designation for a person who responds appropriately to God and conforms himself to what God wants from him. From the same root we have *'ibāda*, "worship" or "service," which designates all the appropriate activities of the servants as set down by the prophetic instructions. The Qur'an says that every prophet is given the same underlying message: "There is no god but I, so worship/serve Me" (21:25). Here we see the two basic functions of the prophets: reminding people of the truth of *tawhīd* and providing guidance, that is, acts of "worship" and "service" that lead to felicity. Nonetheless, the Qur'an also uses the word *servant* to designate the fruit of the creative command. In other words, everything is God's servant by definition, because everything does what He wants it to do. An obvious example is the following verse, which alludes to the all-embracingness of the divine mercy: "There is none in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-Merciful as a servant" (19:93).

Or, take the verse, "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him" (17:23). Jurists and *kalām* experts read this decree (*qaḍā'*) as a religious command, but it can just as well be read as a creative command. Elsewhere the Qur'an says, "When He decrees something, He says to it 'Be!' and it comes to be" (3:47). Read as a creative command, the first verse means that God created everything as His compulsory servant, so all things worship Him by doing exactly what He created them to do. All creatures, as Avicenna (d. 1037) and others put it, love their Creator, and the entire universe is filled with the energy of divine love, spurring each thing to strive for its own specific perfection in the overall scheme of God's wisdom.¹²

In distinguishing between compulsory and voluntary servanthood, some scholars say that compulsory servanthood earns no wages. So, even if things do worship God by nature, they are not rewarded for it. They are embraced by the All-Merciful mercy but not the Ever-Merciful mercy, so they will go to Hell and be deprived of the second mercy. In this understanding, reward—that is, felicity—comes only by following the religious command. Nonetheless, the creative command to worship God can still be

read as an affirmation of the notion that sin, which is contingent and relative, is of no account when God's absolute mercy and forgiveness appear, a point suggested by various hadiths and Qur'anic verses. Perhaps most explicit is the verse, "O My servants who have been immoderate against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy. Surely God forgives all sins!" (39:53).¹³ *Kalām* experts would like you to think that this verse applies only to "Muslims." Yes, of course, but which "Muslims"? Why not compulsory *muslims* as well as voluntary *muslims*? Why not Hindus as well as followers of the Qur'an? And how can you be sure?

The Path to Salvation

I said that experts in transmitted learning hold that the path to salvation lies in obedience to the religious command—belief in the right creed and performance of the right practices. The goal is to reap the reward of the Garden and to avoid the punishment of the Fire. Many theologians call this attitude that of "wage-earners" (*ajūr*). Without denying its legitimacy, they point out that it can be contrasted with another attitude that looks at salvation in terms of self-knowledge or love. In this case, seekers will certainly follow the religious command, but their goal will not be to avoid punishment and earn reward but rather to achieve purity of soul and the furthest possible degree of human perfection.

Love plays an especially prominent role in this second approach to the Sunna. The Qur'anic rationale is fairly obvious: "Say [O Muḥammad!]: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you'" (3:31). Wage-earners see this verse as an exhortation to observe the activities designated by the religious command. Lovers and knowers of God see the verse as an exhortation to follow the Prophet on all levels. It means not only observing the concrete instructions of the Sharia, but also striving to see things as they actually are, actualizing the fullness of our God-given intelligence, and living in the light of *tawhīd*. In mythic terms, one does so by climbing in the Prophet's footsteps on the "ladder" (*mi'rāḡ*) by which he ascended to God and then back down to his community. Everyone acknowledges that, in the case of the Prophet's followers, such an ascent, if possible, can be accomplished only in the realm of soul, spirit, heart, and intelligence. The countless books written on purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) all point to this inner realm.

In a verse addressed to the Prophet, the Qur'an refers to the invisible realm of soul, spirit, and heart as *khulūq*, "character": "Surely you have a

magnificent character" (68:4). *Khalīq* is derived from the same root as *khalq*, "creation," and written the same way in the normal, unvowelled Arabic script. Character is, in effect, the configuration of the soul rather than that of the body. The creative command brings into being a beautiful creation, for God "created everything that He created beautiful" (32:7). The prophetic command reminds people that, however beautiful their created appearance and their *fitra*, their original nature created in the image of God, when they fail to conform to God's guidance, this will obscure their innate beauty and bring about ugliness. The Prophet prayed, "O God, You have made my creation beautiful, so make my character beautiful too!"¹⁴

Transformation of character is part of the process that is initiated and sustained by the creative command and that simultaneously asks for the human participation of freely following the religious command. The jurists discuss ethics (*akhlāq*, the plural of *khalīq*, "character") in terms of the commandments and prohibitions of the religious command, but Sufis and philosophers point out that the deepest meaning of ethics lies in the soul's actualization of its potential as an image of God. The philosophers talk of this actualization as *al-tashabbuh bi-l-ilāh*, "becoming similar to God," or *al-ta'alluh*, "deiformity." Theologians like al-Ghazālī prefer the term *al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*, "becoming characterized by the character traits of God." These character traits—God's "ethics"—are designated by His "most beautiful names" (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). The quest for moral perfection is the attempt to achieve beauty of character, in keeping with the Prophet's supplication: "Make my character beautiful too!"

The function of the religious command is to provide the means for people to bridge the gap between God and the universe, a gap that was opened up by the creative command. The energy for this process, whether on the human or the divine side, is often called love, as in the already cited verse, "Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.'" Following the Prophet in both his deeds and character brings about a transformation defined in terms of the most beautiful character traits of God, for He alone is merciful, He alone is compassionate, He alone is just, He alone is wise. Such qualities can accrue to human beings only as divine bestowals, and the way to attract such bestowals is to follow the religious command on all levels, outwardly and inwardly.

A sound *ḥadīth qudsī* (a saying of the Prophet in which he quotes the words of God) refers to the fruit of man's love for God and God's love for man. Those who love God, it is understood, follow the religious command as embodied in the Sunna, hoping to gain nearness to God so that He will

love them in return. The text reads, "When My servant comes near to Me through good deeds, I love him, and when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his eyesight with which he sees, his hand with which he holds, and his foot with which he walks."¹⁵ Separated lovers, as everyone knows, want to come together. Many theologians held, not least with reference to this hadith, that this coming together of God and man could take place before the entrance into Paradise. In saying so, they never forgot the fundamental distinction between God and man, for God alone is truly real, and the servant has access only to what God bestows. Indeed, the notion that acts of obedience or traits of good character are "mine" contradicts the truth of *tawḥīd* and represents not only pride, but also, on a much deeper level, "hidden associationism" (*shirk khāfi*). The truth is, "My success comes only through God" (Q. 11:88), not through my own efforts.

In short, those Muslims who have kept themselves focused on *tawḥīd* and the creative command, or on the Wage-giver rather than the wages, have generally striven for inner transformation, trying to overcome their blindness and ugliness and aiming to open themselves up to God's beautiful character traits, which were most fully manifest in the Prophet's "magnificent character." Those Muslims who have focused on the practices specified by the religious command have striven to observe the Sharia in all its minutiae and paid less attention to knowledge and self-realization.

Having a Beautiful Opinion of God

Let me conclude by offering a few suggestions as to how one might try to give God His *ḥaqq*—what is rightfully due to Him—while also trying to avoid seeing the religious command simply in terms of what one thinks that God should and should not say. To me it seems obvious that those who are utterly contingent on God, when they want to say something appropriate about Him, should speak with a view toward the mercy and love that gave rise to the universe in the first place. However useful a hermeneutics of suspicion may be in this realm of relativity—the world with its enormously flawed people and institutions—a hermeneutics of trust makes much more sense in dealing with the only reality that truly is.

Having a beautiful opinion (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) of God means taking *tawḥīd* seriously. Both the transmitted sources and the intellectual sciences tell us that God is wise, generous, and just and that His mercy and compassion predominate over all other attributes. This means that there is none knowing and wise but God, none merciful and generous but God, none

just and equitable but God. In other words, God alone truly knows what He is doing, and the rest of us are only along for the ride. God is not a bumbling oaf, nor does He bother telling us more than we need to know. When He does a job, He does it in a manner that gets it done as it should be done. In all this, He takes into account human forgetfulness, ignorance, injustice, and incapacity, and He makes use of all of these to further His own ends, which are defined by His infinite compassion, wisdom, and love.

When we apply the absolute truth of *tawhīd* to the relative truths of prophecy, we can be excused for keeping our beautiful opinion and thinking that, when God sent all those prophets and set up all those religions, He did so as the Most Merciful of the merciful, with much more tenderness toward human beings than any mother has ever had toward her children. To suggest that people, who are God's compulsory servants in any case, have been able to foil His purposes and pervert His messages such that only one valid message remains is to suggest that God has resigned from His office—this, by the way, is the “Deism” championed by thinkers of the Enlightenment (the closest Arabic equivalent of Deism is *ta'wīl*, an archetypal heresy). To think like this is to reach the conclusion that what God really wants for almost everyone is to inflict pain and suffering through the inescapable darkness of their own nature, a nature that He bestowed upon them. It means to imagine that God sent as His final message a religion that has failed miserably in the task of convincing people of its exclusive truth. If Islam—or any other religion—were the *unique* saving message, then God would turn out to have been totally incompetent. To think this way is—putting it mildly—to have an ugly opinion of God.

Notes

1. Both hadiths are cited as sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by the eleventh-century scholar al-Raghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharr'a ilā makārim al-shar'ī'a*, ed. T. 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, 1972), 132 (there is no agreement on the identity of the *zindīq*). No doubt the second hadith is quoted much less than the first, but my point is simply that well-known scholars do in fact cite it.
2. Given the internal diversity of these three broad approaches, it is always misleading to lump their various subdivisions together. For an elementary, heuristic attempt to highlight the main differences and similarities in these three approaches to understanding God, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994), ch. 6.

3. Failing to translate the Arabic word *Allāh* (God) in this sentence leads both Muslims and non-Muslims to egregious misunderstandings of Islamic theology. It ignores, among other things, the basic Qur'anic principle of God's one-and-onlyness, the fact that “Our God and your God is one God” (29:46). The claim that *Allāh* should not be translated because it is a proper name is baseless, given that its meaning can be understood from its etymology, which is not the case with proper names.
4. This is what Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) calls the two commands. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) prefers the word *irādā* (desire) to *amr* (command). The two are also called *amr al-takwīn* and *amr al-taklīf*, terms which, according to Harry Wolfson, go back to the Mu'tazilī Abū al-Hudhayl (d. ca. 841). See Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalām* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 141.
5. Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fādī, 1993), 4:370 (Book 35: “Kitāb al-tawhīd wa-l-tawakkul”).
6. The hadith is found in standard sources, such as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (in “Kitāb al-dhikr”). See A. J. Wensinck et al., *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 6:511.
7. This statement appears in well-known hadith collections, such as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (in “Kitāb al-adab”) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (in “Kitāb al-tawba”).
8. This hadith appears in, among other places, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (in “Kitāb al-tawba”); a partial version of it appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (in “Kitāb al-adab”).
9. *La tanzur ilā man qāla wa-nzur ilā mā qāla*. Al-Jāhīz, *al-Kalimat al-mi'a min ḥikam amīr al-mu'minīn al-imām 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib*, <http://www.tebyan.net/index.aspx?pid=31143&BookID=26978&PageIndex=0&Language=2> (saying #11; last accessed on September 20, 2011).
10. Al-Bīrūnī's (d. ca. 1048) great study *Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind*, translated by Edward Sachau in the nineteenth century as *Albērūnī's India*, has sometimes been cited as an exception because of the manner in which he engaged Hindu pandits in conversation. Nonetheless, al-Bīrūnī often condemns Hindu religious teachings out of hand and shows no attempt to understand their logic within the Hindu universe. A great deal of what he says is remarkably insightful, and perhaps the book is indeed a first foray into “comparative religion,” but he paid far more attention to the mathematics of Indian astronomical theories than to myth, philosophy, or theology.
11. This hadith appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (in “Kitāb al-imān”).
12. See, for example, *Risāla fī al-'ishq*, translated by Emil L. Fackenheim, “A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina,” *Medieval Studies* 7 (1945): 208–228. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' had already made the point in their *Risāla fī māḥiyat al-'ishq*, and the notion became fairly standard in both philosophy and Sufism. See William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).
13. Lest anyone think that this is simply my personal understanding, let me cite one of many possible passages from well-known scholars that make the same basic point. It is found in the great ten-volume Persian exegesis of the Qur'an, *Kashf al-asrār*.

completed in 126 by the staunchly Sunni theologian Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, a contemporary of al-Ghazālī and follower of the famous Ḥanbalī Sufī 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī (on Maybudī, see Annabelle Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006]). The passage follows a long exegetical section quoting the opinions of various authorities on Q. 25:20-44. Maybudī then turns to explaining the "allusions" (*ishārāt*) that can be discovered in these verses by someone with deep insight into their meaning. In the previous section of the commentary, Maybudī had explained that the verse in question refers to the terrible punishment that will be meted out on the Day of Resurrection to those who do not follow the religious command. In this section, he applies the principle of *tawhīd* and points to the foundational significance of the mercy that drives the creative command. The verse is this: "We [God] shall advance on what work they have done and make it scattered dust" (25:23).

One of the shaykhs of the Path said, "No verse in the whole Qur'an makes me as happy as this verse. When God throws these tainted works of ours into the wind of His utter lack of needs (*istighnā'*), He will act toward us with His bounty alone. What He does with His bounty will be worthy of His generosity, and that is better than what is worthy of our works."

Then he said, "God has rights (*ḥaqq*) against us, like obedience and worship, but in our makeup we are destitute (*muffis*), and it is He who has decreed our destitution. When the decreer decrees that someone be destitute, the plaintiff can have nothing against him. . . . Whenever someone is destitute, it is incumbent to give him respite so that he can acquire some capital. But we will never acquire any capital until the next world, when He will pour the treasury of bounty on our heads. We have no riches through our own being—we are rich through His attributes. Nothing comes from us or our works. When some affair is opened up for us, it is His bounty that opens it up. When He accepts us, He does not accept us because of the form of our practice. He accepts us because of our readiness that He saw in His beginningless knowledge. Everything in the cosmos is subordinate to that readiness. Wait until tomorrow [the Resurrection], when He will make the readiness apparent and open up the doors of the treasures. He will give the treasury of mercy [e.g., the All-Merciful mercy] to the disobedient and the treasury of bounty [e.g., the Ever-Merciful mercy] to the destitute and thereby let them discharge His rights with His treasury, for the servants cannot discharge His rights with what belongs to them." (*Kashf al-asrār wa-tuddat al-abrār*, ed. 'Alī Aṣghar Ḥikmat [Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1952-60], 7:40; for a much briefer version, see *ibid.*, 2:23).

14. This hadith appears in the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal.

15. This hadith appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (in "Kitāb al-riqāq").

4

Beyond Polemics and Pluralism

THE UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF THE QUR'AN

Reza Shah-Kazemi

And they say: "None entereth Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian." These are their vain desires. Say: "Bring your proof if ye are truthful." Nay, but whosoever submitteeth his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (Q. 2:111-112)

Introduction

This passage from the Qur'an demonstrates clearly the spiritual sterility of polemics and the logical absurdity of religious chauvinism. The Qur'an does not allow us to play the game of polemics. It is not possible to claim that only those called "Muslims" in the confessional sense enter Paradise; rather, we are called upon to stress heartfelt submission to God, together with the practice of virtue in consequence of that submission, as being the foundation upon which one can legitimately hope for that divine grace by means of which, alone, one enters Paradise. In other words, the logic of this riposte to narrow-minded polemical claims compels us to rise to a higher level of discourse, one that transcends theological perspectives based on sentiment and vanity; or on what the Qur'an refers to in this verse as *amānī*, plural of *umniyya*, which can be translated as "vain desire"—vain both in the sense of "conceited" and in the sense of being "in vain," that is, futile. It is important to note that this word is also used in relation to the Muslims, in the following passage, which reinforces the message of Q. 2:111-112: